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TO LIVE A LIFETIME

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John M. Buchanan

The point is, aging need not be an enemy. The Christian scriptures will not accept the more classical idea that adult maturity is a finished state, that at a certain point, at the peak of physical and intellectual manhood or womanhood, you are the complete person, you have it made, you have reached perfection. No, life is an endless pilgrimage: the Christian is a pilgrim, a wayfarer ... For the journey to go forward, to move ahead, you have to let go of where you've been, where you are now, so as to live more fully ... Essential to the human pilgrimage, the Christian journey, is a self-emptying, more or less like Christ's own emptying.

Walter J. Burghardt
Seasons That Laugh Or Weep

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PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Street Chicago IL 60611-2094
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture
John 14:23-27
Isaiah 65:17-25
"No more shall there be ... an old person who does not live out a lifetime."

In Norman Cousins' best-seller of a few years ago, *The Anatomy of an Illness*, there is a chapter on "Creativity and Longevity." And in that chapter there is a wonderful account of the time Mr. Cousins visited Pablo Casals, the famous musician, in his home in Puerto Rico, a few days before Casals' turned ninety.

> "About 8 o-clock, Marta would help him start the day. His various infirmities made it difficult for him to dress himself ... he was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and emphysema. He was badly stooped and his breathing was labored. His head was pitched forward and he walked with a shuffle. His hands were swollen and his fingers were clenched."

Casals always played the piano before breakfast. Cousins watched as he arranged himself on the piano bench with great awkwardness and obvious discomfort ... and then witnessed a miracle.

> "I was not prepared for the miracle that happened. The fingers unlocked and reached for the keys. His back straightened. He seemed to breathe more freely. Now his fingers settled on the keys. Then came the opening bars of Bach's 'Well-Tempered Clavier,' played with sensitivity and control. He hummed as he played, said that Bach spoke to him here — as he placed his hand over his heart.
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> "Then he plunged into a Brahms concerto and his fingers, now agile and powerful, raced across the keyboard with dazzling speed.
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> "Having finished the piece, he stood up by himself, far taller and straighter than when he had come into the room. He walked to the breakfast table with no trace of a shuffle, ate heartily, talked animatedly, finished the meal, then went for a walk on the beach."

Cousins watched as the same ritual occurred after the afternoon nap time. The musician, he said, was able to transcend the very real afflictions of his advanced age because he had "something of over-riding importance to do." [p.71-74]

"To live a lifetime." Pablo Casals did it. So, for that matter, did Norman Cousins who fought serious illness to a standstill for several years and lived, a long time after he was supposed to, a full and vital life.

To live a lifetime. I discovered that phrase in a passage that I know well — for other reasons. It's in one of the most important parts of the Bible. It's at the end of the book of Isaiah, a section, a letter, actually, written to the exiled Hebrews, languishing in Babylon. It is God's promise not to abandon those exiles, but to work through the sometimes murky processes of human history, to put things right, to redeem them, to bring them home where they belong, to restore them again to their rightful place.

But this time that wonderful promise is of a new creation. The biblical writer is here revealing something of God's intent for the whole project, a time when there will be no more weeping; a time when there will be no infants dying; a time when people will build houses and then be allowed to live in them; a time when people will plant crops and vineyards and enjoy the produce; that is to say, a time of no economic exploitation, no military invasions, no one will labor in vain — and in the middle of it all — "No more shall there be an old person who does not live out a lifetime." [Isaiah 65:20]

It is a great passage and a wonderful vision which has brought comfort and courage to people in all sorts of difficult circumstances. But never before had I noticed that part of the great promise is for the elderly: "No one will die without living a lifetime."

The Bible consistently honors and values old age. Genesis refers to a "good old age": Job, to "a ripe old age." The old ones are called the Elders, a term of respect and honor. They are valued for wisdom and they become the judges in Israel because of their experience and their discernment.

The Bible seems to go out of its way to suggest that old age is a good idea, a good thing — not only for the elderly, but for the whole community. Without knowing exactly how the writers are counting, it is still clear that life doesn't really get interesting in the Bible until you're well along in years. Abraham, after all, is in his mid-70's when he and Sarah have their first baby, pick up their belongings, move to a new land. Just about the time you and I are looking around for a retirement facility with a good health care unit, Abraham and Sarah are looking for a place to start up a whole new nation.

The fact is, the Bible holds up a notion of the continuum of human life, moving toward its fulfillment, its summation, its completion — its "lifetimeness." That contrasts, as you know, rather sharply with the way our culture views the same subject of aging. Our culture's way of viewing aging is more accurately defined as loss, diminution, narrowing, deteriorating, falling apart at the seams, lessening in value. Not a victory but a defeat. Not growing, but growing smaller. Sometimes we even say that it in its clearest and most oppressive form when we observe that we begin to die the day we're born. Or that in our thirties our bodies, which have been becoming more and more strong and robust, begin to deteriorate. The Judeo-Christian tradition doesn't think like that And the problem is that the degree to which we buy into that we diminish, not only the lives of the elderly, but, the Bible would suggest, all of our lives — the life of the culture itself.

One of the persons who thought most creatively about aging in our culture was a salty Presbyterian, one of the saints of our church, by the name of Maggie Kuhn. Maggie Kuhn just died last month, at the age of 89. She was a career employee, a bureaucrat of the national Presbyterian church, and a good one. And when our denomination enforced the "mandatory-retirement-at-65" policy on her she was at first, astonished, and then hurt, and then she became very angry. So instead of moving to Florida or checking into the local retirement center, she formed an organization called the Gray Panthers and took on everything in the culture which she found limiting her life and the lives of the elderly.

"We are not 'Senior Citizens', she wrote; we are not, certainly, 'Golden Agers', "We are the elders, the experienced ones: we are maturing, growing adults, responsible for the survival of the society." She concluded that nobody else much cared about whether we were going to live into another century, so the old people better care about it. "We are," she said, "not wrinkled babies — succumbing to trivial, purposeless waste of our years." *[Maggie Kuhn on Aging* p.41]

She wrote and traveled, and built that organization, The Gray Panthers, into 40,000 members around the country. She fought age discrimination wherever she saw it, and was, I discovered on one difficult occasion, absolutely fearless. We had invited her to address our church in Columbus. She was a tiny woman, with tightly pulled back gray hair, granny glasses, a long skirt, beads and beads and beads (it was the 70's) and in the course of one day in downtown Columbus, made everybody angry, and everybody uncomfortable — and no one ever forgot her — and no one, I suspect, thought the same way again about what it means to be an aging adult.

She was particularly impatient with the entertainment industry, with television: Tim Conway's milking The Carol Burnett Show's audience for laughs with that pathetic, shuffling, sad parody of an old man. Johnny Carson had her on the Tonight Show and to his chagrin, she took him on about his Aunt Blabby impersonation which he then, by the way, discontinued.

Maggie Kuhn's point was that each of us has a gift, a lifetime to live — we don't know how long it's going to be but it is a lifetime — and it is our choice to live it at a pace and intentionality and a degree of intensity that is ours, not the culture's, to determine. It is a matter of our spirit, she said, our identity, not as commodities on a market to produce goods and services. We are essentially valuable children of God. God's spirit is in us, we belong to a tradition that values, that doesn't demean, but values, aging.

It goes deeper than the comedy routines on television. The late Joseph Sittler, who taught theology at the University of Chicago and wrote and lectured and lived fully until he died, thought a lot about aging in his final years and wrote about it in a fine little book of essays, *"Gravity and Grace"*.

Sittler observed that aging is a kind of awkward fact in our culture. Our entire system, he said, assumes that with enough time, energy, and most of all, money, we Americans can solve or "fix" every problem. And so, aging is an awkward fact that we are determined either to deny or disguise.

In another essay, Sittler observed that one of the problems is that we base our identity as human beings on our employment, on our productivity. We are, essentially in this country, what we do. So when you ask an American who she or he is — the answer is what he or she does vocationally. That being the case, Sittler asked, "How do you know who you are when you no longer do what you used to do?" His resolution was to find plenty of things to do.

When he retired from the University of Chicago, he walked down Woodlawn Avenue and signed up at the Lutheran School of Theology, and began another career of teaching. When his eyesight was totally gone, he invited students to come into his home and read aloud to him every single morning. With some trepidation, I invited him to preach at my installation when I arrived in Chicago. I was delighted that he agreed to do it — I was delighted that he even remembered me (I was not particularly a memorable student!). I suggested that I drive to Hyde Park to meet with him and discuss this big event in my life. He said, "No, I'll come to see you, you're busier than me these days." I did not know at that time that he had lost his eyesight entirely, and so I was shocked to see him carefully make his way with his cane, up the steps into the office. After our meeting, I suggested that I walk downstairs with him to the car which I assumed would be waiting for him. "No", he said ... "No car, but you could point me in the direction of the nearest bus stop." I was horrified. "You're not going downtown, you're not going to transfer down to Hyde Park, you can't even see! He said he was delighted to do it. He refused my offer to drive him home. He said he liked the adventure of riding on buses, he had done it before and it was a good challenge. He lived a lifetime.

Judith Viorst, in her good book *"Necessary Losses"*, says that the elderly in this culture are perceived as,

> "sexless, useless, powerless;" none of which, she says, is even close to the truth. [P.323]

And she quotes actress and writer Florida Scott Maxwell:

> "We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high. If it is a long defeat, it is also a great victory." [Viorst, p.321]

This Christian faith of ours, with its Judaic roots, honors the elders, the parents of the culture among us, the wise and experienced ones. In the new creation, which we believe was brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is no Greek or Hebrew, no male or female, no old or young. All — each and every one — is a precious part of the promised new creation. Part of what Jesus did after all, was to affirm the sacred value of every human being, particularly those his culture had rejected as worthless. The babies, for instance, who weren't worth much, Jesus asked to come to him and laid his hands on them; poor people, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the ones with a disease everyone knew as a sign of some immorality, leprosy; all were part of the circle of the kingdom he formed around him. And so, of all the places in this world, his church, the church of Jesus Christ, is where the elderly are, and must be, honored and celebrated and accepted simply for who they are: valuable human beings, valuable and important parts of our community.

It is, of course, a relevant topic for each of us. Some of us have aging parents who increasingly are dependent on us. Some of us must cope with aging parents who are ill, in another place, and whose personal needs are now more than we can begin to meet and so we find ourselves relying on others, sometimes people we don't know, but to whom we now must entrust the care of our dearest ones. Most of us are close to someone dealing with the changes of retirement, highly productive, hard-working professionals, who suddenly have nothing to do and are unhappily bored, and, if married, driving another one crazy because of the enforced togetherness.

And, the obvious, our own aging, of course.

"Old age is what you're stuck with if you want a long life", Judith Viorst quips.

We're getting older — as individuals and as a culture.

I love what Bruce Bliven, former editor of the *New Republic* magazine said about being seventy something ...

> "I don't feel like an old man. I feel like a young man with something wrong with him."

Or George Burns, an expert on the topic;

> "You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there."

The population is aging. A recent *TIME* magazine feature on Jeanne Calment, who just celebrated her 120th birthday in France, explained that the fastest-growing portion of our population is over 85. In fact, some demographers are suggesting that if you are already 65, and in reasonably good health, your life expectancy is around 90. It used to be that the major question for a 65 year-old was — "are you ready to let go and meet your maker?" Now the most relevant question is "what are your plans for the next 25 years?"

Erik Erikson, who has taught us so very much about the stages of human development, said that the task or major characteristic of the "eighth stage", or old age, is integration; integrity. To see one's life as a whole piece, a "lifetime" to use Isaiah's wonderful image. Looking at life with absolute honesty and knowing finally what is important and what is not so important and probably never was.

It is not necessarily a time of diminishment of passion and profound caring, by the way. It is simply not accurate that young people feel powerfully and care deeply about things, while old people bank their fires and don't get excited about anything. As a matter of fact, I can testify that the members of our own worshipping community that I know to be passionately committed to causes — not always easy causes, by the way — abortion rights, handgun control, economic justice — who I can count on for strong response to sermons, pro, sometimes con, for that matter, are not necessarily the young adults.

Florida Scott Maxwell reflects:

> "Age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time. My seventies were interesting and serene, but my eighties were passionate. I grow more intense with age. To my surprise, I burst out in hot conviction. I have to calm down. I am too frail to indulge in moral fervor." [see Lewis Thomas, *The Fragile Species*, p. 75]

One of the very best testimonies to the promise and possibility of aging that I have ever read at least, is a delightful book by Sadie and Bessie Delaney, *Having Our Say.* They are African Americans, sisters who lived together all their lives. Their father was born into slavery and became an Episcopal bishop. At the time they wrote the book, they were 103 and 101. They are probably 105 and 103 now, and I noticed that they just published another book.

They are witty, full of joyful playfulness. Bessie, responding to the interviewer says,

> "I'll tell you something, honey, I would have made a great president. That's right! Me! I'm honest and I'm tough — and the first thing I would do if I was president is to say that people over one hundred years of age no longer have to pay taxes! Lord knows, I've paid my share." [p. 199]

The sisters do Yoga every morning with a television program, and after Yoga they each take a clove of garlic, chop it up and swallow it whole. No odor. "We also take a teaspoon of cod liver oil. Bessie thinks it's disgusting." I thought if you could do that every morning at 6:30, the rest of the day would be pretty easy.

They boil all their water even though they know they don't have to but "it's a habit, child, and at our age we're not about to change much."

They say their prayers every night. Because they are so old, they have a lot of relatives and they pray for each one every night by name. So it takes a long time.

Sadie wakes at 6:30.

> "The first thing I do when I open my eyes is smile and then I say, 'Thank you Lord for another day ...' and then I go to Bessie's room and wake her. Sometimes I have to knock on her headboard and she opens her eyes and says 'Oh, Lord, another day?'"

Near the end of the book the interviewer asks the inevitable question; Do they think about death? Are they afraid to die? Sadie answers;

> "You know, when you are this old, you don't know if you're going to wake up in the morning. But I don't worry about dying, and neither does Bessie. We are at peace. You do kind of wonder, when it's going to happen. That's why you learn to love each day, child." [p. 205]

And so there is a discernment with age: a movement from mere knowledge to something called wisdom. A sense of what is important and what is not so important. And part of it is a deepening of trust, a personal sense that while aging may sometimes feel like a process of deterioration to us, it is at the same time a magnificent process of growing within the providence of a kind and loving God, a becoming who we are intended to be spiritually, a moving across the years to a summation, a completion, a lifetime.

Professor Sittler studied, taught, thought about, wrestled and argued with St. Paul all his life, particularly the great Epistle to the Romans, which he loved and called Paul's most mature theology. Reflecting on his own advanced age, Sittler quoted Paul:

> "'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or we die, we are the Lord's.' Period! That is the fundamental and absolute word ... and it is immensely satisfying to old people." [p. 127]

And to all of us, Professor Sittler; on our way to becoming old people, on our way toward the goal — the living of a lifetime. Amen.

You have promised, O God, that in Jesus Christ we will never be separated from you. Thank you for that. Thank you for your loving, guiding hand along the way of our pilgrimage. Thank you for our elders, our wise ones. Bless them and keep us all in your gracious care; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

New Conclusion